Leadership Gap: Too Little Rest and Renewal

by Rocky Wallace

In this mad-paced world, leaders often find themselves exhausted and lacking passion. Work is no longer a joy and they have lost their excitement about the road ahead. They live in a constant state of stress. They often realize that their lives are out of balance, but also know that in order to correct this balance, they would need to make some difficult adjustments in their lives.

This article addresses this dilemma faced by so many leaders today, by taking a closer look at the results of interviews with leaders from the non-profit sector and offering suggestions that could have positive impact on any leader's life.

Interview Data

An e-mail survey was sent out to school and other non-profit leaders, probing the question: How much rest and renewal do leaders purposely build into their weekly schedules and annual calendars? The vast majority of the 48 responses returned were from principals and the results were not surprising. The data revealed that:

- The leaders who responded average 6.2 hours of sleep a night during a working week.
- An average of two days a month, are taken off for total rest and relaxation.
- Annually, this survey group only takes 8 days for vacation or retreat.
- Only 1 person from this group has ever been on a planned sabbatical.
- Only 8 of the 48 organizations actually offer a sabbatical of some kind.
- The group averages 15.6 hours a month on hobbies or social time that is not considered pressure.

In the affective domain, the relentless demands of work do affect other areas of life:

- Only 25 of the 48 said that their life vision is being fulfilled by their present job.
- 31 added that their careers are creating consistent stress in their lives.
- 31 shared that their families have been affected by the stress of their work.
- 25 said that e-mail and other technology have not lessened their work stress, but often added to it.
- 40 still feel they have a passion for their work.

Implications

The results of this leadership survey indicate that, generally, leaders do not get enough rest and do not feel renewed. Instead, they operate in a world of daily stress, not feeling that there is even enough time to replenish on weekends or with regular retreats. Their families are often affected and they sometimes lose the passion for the work they use to enjoy earlier in their careers. The technology they have access to often only adds to the problem, creating more work, not less.

What do these vulnerabilities mean to the individuals, their organization and their relationships with family? Sadly, many talented people from various vocations and backgrounds who are in the prime of their lives, are already burnt out and suffering mental, emotional, physical, spiritual, and relational damage. Others keep going, not realizing that the effects of these stressed-out years will only show years down the line.

Research Offers A Better Way

O'Neil (2004) talks about the paradox of success, explaining that winning at work may mean losing at life. He cautions that being driven at work can lead to careless tendencies in our relationships and take us further away from healthy, balanced living. The Arbinger Institute (2000) identifies this blind spot as self-deception and urges the leader to self-examine in all areas, thus freeing him or herself to get out of the box that has become a self-imposed barrier. Farrar and Farrar (2003) add that the whole concept of having it all, or being able to do it all, is erroneous and is a popular paradigm of the American culture that leads to self-destruction.

Organizations play a huge role in fostering this pre-occupation or addiction to work. Maslach and Maslach (1997) call for organizational self-assessment to help identify areas where workers on all

levels are being pressured to over-perform at the expense of the person and the long-term health of the organization. Blanchard and Miller (2004) add that organizations should be moving toward empowerment for all employees, allowing for shared ownership in decision making and less top-down micro-managing that often stifles creativity and can lead to the assumption that the work load is not overwhelming when it is indeed wearing employees down.

Wuellner (1998) cautions that the shepherd must also be nurtured or exhaustion and burnout will eventually take over. Leaders need support and coaching in the area of prevention of overload. Willard (2002) sums up the whole concept of burnout in the assertion that true rest and renewal includes a renovation of the heart. Strategies for recovery need to include healing of the spiritual domain, in essence, the individual returning to his or her "hiding place" where internal peace and contentment can thrive again.

Recommendations

There is hope for the overworked and stressed leader. In many cases, the solutions are relatively simple to implement. Here is a sample list of strategies:

- Take the time to audit a typical work week. Identify daily sleep habits, overtime at work, down time with family, hobbies and time for social relationships. Then make the necessary adjustments.

- Audit your monthly and yearly cycle. How much actual time are you setting aside for vacation, retreat and renewal? Again, make adjustments.

- Renew your daily cycle at work by re-focusing on relationships as the top priority.

- Work for balance every day, including paying attention to nutrition and exercise habits.

- Most importantly, steal away daily for quiet time and reflection. Renewal and internal healing and wellness begin with prayer and becoming quiet enough to listen.

Conclusion

Many leaders in our "workaholic" culture are exhausted and burnt out. Often, this is the result of organizational "habits" that place seemingly endless expectations on employees. As a result, their personal health is affected, as well as relational health with family and friends. Eventually, life dreams and the all important daily balance get lost in a blur of responsibility and lack of ability to stay focused on the most important core values. A key solution to this cultural dilemma is for individuals to self-evaluate and then establish reasonable, but also assertive, priorities that focus on spiritual, physical, mental, emotional, and relational health, thus bringing personal rest and renewal, allowing for taking in the fullness of life as when we were children.

About the Author

Rocky Wallace recently completed his Doctor of Strategic Leadership degree at Regent University. He currently teaches in Morehead State University's Graduate School of Education. He is a former school principal and previously worked for the Kentucky Department of Education as a leadership mentor to new principals.

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